

NOTICE BRIEFING STATEMENT

Unit: Voyageurs National Park

Title: Notice of Availability, General Management Plan/Visitor Use and Facilities Plan/Environmental Impact Statement

Congressional Districts:

Minnesota: 8th District -- James Oberstar
Senate -- Paul Wellstone
-- Mark Dayton

In addition to the listed Congressional offices, the park has also kept Congresswomen. Betty McCollum (4th District – Minnesota) fully informed throughout the planning process. She serves on the House Resources Committee. None of the congressional members submitted comments on the draft plan/EIS. On several occasions, their staffs attended meetings of the Visitor Use and Facilities Plan Consultation Group and other public meetings. The park is located in Saint Louis and Koochiching counties.

Issues:

- The General Management Plan/Visitor Use and Facilities Plan for Voyageurs National Park has been completed following a 3½-year planning and public participation process. Approximately 1000 copies of the two-volume document have been distributed to the public.
- The Visitor Use and Facilities Plan segment of the plan was authorized in statute in 1982, but funds for its preparation had never been authorized. When the park commenced its General Management Planning process, it convened a separate Consultation Group of 41 participants to discuss issues related to visitor uses and facilities in the vicinity of the park. The head of the Minnesota Department of Mediation Services served as the facilitator for the group.
- The park conducted 12 public meetings at various stages in the plan – scoping, alternatives, draft – in four locations: International Falls, Orr, Duluth, and the Twin Cities. In addition, the consultation group met 13 times. It consisted of Federal (USFS), State (DNR, Department of Tourism) Provincial (Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources), and local officials (city, county, and lake associations), tourism professionals, and persons experienced in outdoor recreation (University of Minnesota), as directed by the statute. The Visitor Use and Facilities Plan companion document to the General Management Plan was prepared in consultation with that group, also as directed by the statute.
- There was extraordinary participation in the planning process – over 2000 commented on the draft plan. In spite of the fact that the park has been controversial for much of its 25-year history, there was remarkable unanimity in comments. Most said that they like the park as it is now and sought only to maintain the diversity of uses, the peace and quiet and freedom that characterize recreational experiences in the park now. Most comments suggested more stringent alternatives for management than are presented in the GMP/VUFP/EIS.
- The single major issue that generated the most discussion was the question of how many houseboats should be permitted in the park. Until now, there have been no permits required for houseboats (or any other users). The plan calls for a subsequent Houseboat Management Plan once 60 houseboats (overnight) are counted in either of the park's two basins. That subsequent plan will establish the carrying capacity of the park for houseboats. It is anticipated that this threshold (60 boats) will not be reached for several more years since the largest number of houseboats counted to date in a basin is 45. [It should be noted that unlike other NPS units where concessionaires rent houseboats, the commercial houseboat companies for Voyageurs are located outside the park and offer so-called “bare bones” charters, analogous to car rentals. Approximately 2/3 of the houseboats used in the park are

commercial rental houseboats; the remaining 1/3 are privately owned and also berthed outside the park.]

- The plan makes no changes with respect to the types or kinds of motorized and non-motorized use in the park. It has no effect on the existing use of snowmobiles or floatplanes in the park. There are no fees at Voyageurs. There is no fee to enter the park and none is sought by the plan. Because of the difficulties of counting visitors was raised as an issue repeatedly, the park proposes to implement a free, self-registration permit system for overnight users to provide more reliable information, beginning next year.
- County officials sought an extension in the comment period of 90 days in the fall of 2000. The park granted an extension of 60 days so that the total comment period for the plan was 120 days. (CEQ minimum is 45 days). Only one of the two counties submitted comments. Both counties held their own public hearings on the plan. The transcripts of those hearing are included in the GMP/VUFP/EIS and issues raised in those meetings are responded to, where appropriate.
- A delegation of local officials, accompanied by Senator Dayton (and representatives from other Minnesota Congressional offices), met with NPS Director Fran Mainella, Regional Director Bill Schenk, and others in Washington on September 7, 2001. They requested that the document not be released. The Director indicated that she could find no reason to delay the plan's distribution. Accordingly, when the document was received from the printer, distribution of the plan began.
- Newspaper articles and radio reports on the availability of the plan have appeared in regional media. To date, the park has received no written comments and a few phone calls.

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(Be sure the contacts are the folks at the park or a project manager of some kind)